



Developing a Niche Practice Area

by Joseph M. Hanna, 2014 Fellow

In today's challenging legal job market, very few of us can land our dream job — or even one we are more than moderately passionate about — early in our careers. But while you are doing your time in the trenches, it is important to take advantage of the plentiful resources available to you so that when an opportunity presents itself, you are ready for it.

Here are three steps to develop a nice practice area and build a reputation in your preferred subject area:

1. Master the basic skills for becoming the best lawyer you can be.

Creating anything monumental requires installing a solid foundation. No matter the practice area, it is critical for you to view these early years of your career as an opportunity to hone the basics — research and analysis, writing and orating, appearing in court and deposing witnesses — all while absorbing the nuances of navigating the legal landscape.

This combination of improving and learning turns ability into talent and cultivates an intuitive sense for research and analysis that will prepare you to excel in any practice area. Once you develop and then sharpen the basic skills of legal practice, you will be ready to start the process of marketing your skills and generating business. In-house attorneys have been around the block and can see through attorneys who do not have any substance. Therefore, it is absolutely essential for you to be able to speak with confidence about the intricacies of the law, and to back that up with an example or two from your own experience.

2. Make time for your interests.

During my first year as an associate at my firm, Goldberg Segalla, I found that my attention kept landing on sports and entertainment law. But there was no framework in place that would allow me to explore it formally, so I dedicated a good portion of my free time to staying up to date on the sports business landscape and the legal trends that were developing. I set up Westlaw alerts to channel my research, and that helped me uncover an opportunity — there was very little published scholarship related to sports and trademarking.

I realized this could be my break. I dove into my research and wrote “Beware of Dawg, Beware of Owner, Too,” an article exploring the Cleveland Browns’ legal battle over their use of the phrase “Dawg Pound.” Fortunately, I had begun to build my professional network early on with the American Bar Association’s Section of Litigation, where as a student I participated in its Judicial Internship Opportunity Program. Membership in the ABA offered me a high-profile outlet in which to submit and publish my article, and it succeeded even beyond my youthful expectations: the ABA magazine *General Practice, Solo & Small Firm Division* named it the best intellectual property article published in 2006.

It has never been easier to engage in the areas of law that interest you. Take advantage of CLEs and the abundant resources available through the internet, and commit to expanding your legal education during your down time. Start a blog, or find one to contribute to, and circulate your writing to your leaders at your firm or company. Keep an eye on external publishing prospects — whether through membership in organizations like the ABA or DRI, your local bar association, or publications like *Law360* that accept contributed content — and make sure you communicate your interests to your colleagues and mentors. These are the people who can create internal opportunities for you (or who could use the help of a co-author on their next big article).

Something will come up, but only if you put yourself in place to capitalize on it.

3. Help your firm or company identify — and fulfill — a need.

Through my writing and participation in the ABA and other organizations, I had built up the credibility and credentials needed to forge my own path. Even as a very young attorney in the commercial litigation group at Goldberg Segalla, I successfully pitched the creation of a Sports and Entertainment Practice Group at my firm — a multidisciplinary team of lawyers that would address the unique combination of challenges facing clients in these industries.

Because I was able to show that I was on top of the emerging sports and entertainment law issues that lawyers and the courts were exploring, I earned the support and encouragement of my mentors, including Rick Cohen, our managing partner, and Chris Belter, the chair of our Corporate Services and Commercial Litigation Practice Group — the type of high-level support any young lawyer needs to turn such a vision into reality.

Together we focused the Sports and Entertainment team’s energy on the legal issues in which we anticipated seeing dramatic and important change. We picked up one matter for a professional team or athlete, then another, and then another. We kept writing about the emerging trends to build our firm’s credibility, and I published the legal community’s most comprehensive article examining the pro

football impact of traumatic brain injuries well before the NFL concussion scandal made daily headlines. A decade later, we now regularly handle major sports and entertainment-related litigation and represent Hall of Fame clients, nationally recognized entertainers, and every major professional sports league.

None of this would have been possible if I had not spent my early years mastering the fundamentals of legal practice and immersing myself, mostly in the evenings and on weekends, in the legal issues that interested me most. At the end of the day, if you want to do what you love, first you have to be good at what you do.

2014 Fellow [Joseph Hanna](#) is a commercial litigator and legal adviser who is nationally recognized for his work in media and entertainment law and for being a leading voice for diversity in the legal and business communities. Joe is Chair of Goldberg Segalla's Sports and Entertainment Practice Group and its Retail Hospitality Practice Group and chair of the firm's Diversity Task Force. In 2015, Joe was the youngest ever to be named Lawyer of the Year in the Bar Association of Erie County's nearly 130-year history.